

FEATURE

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WHY DO PEOPLE MIGRATE TO THE CITY?

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Why do people migrate to the city? Answers to this important question emerge from a series of studies carried out in developing countries during the past decade. A Migration Review Task Force of the Canadian-based International Development Research Centre recently reviewed these studies in order to relate the findings to the process of economic development and assist in the development of new policy-related research that may help developing-country planners deal with internal migration. Some of the trends revealed by the research conducted in Latin America are summarized in this article.

Internal migration in developing countries is a highly visible problem. In fact, 65 percent or more of the adults in many of the large expanding cities of these countries are migrants from rural areas.

The urban problems resulting from this movement are particularly visible to politicians and planners: the circles of slum housing around the city, the cost of extending services to ever-growing suburbs, water shortages, and a general administrative confusion because of overlapping political jurisdictions.

The fact that a high proportion of the "problem" population in the slum area may be migrants with little education and of poor rural origins has reinforced stereotypes that all migrants to the city are of poor farm backgrounds. But is this so? Who migrates and why they do has been the topic of numerous studies during the past 10 years.

As the researchers participating in the IDRC's Migration Review Task Force point out, the characteristics of the migrants are generally well known. It is known, for instance, that the motivation behind migration is economic, that is, it is a search for employment and security. Studies also show that

most migrants are young adults who have higher education levels, and that the more education they have, the more likely they are to migrate to the city.

In Latin America where urbanization is well underway, the population is already more than half urban. Migration to the cities in some countries such as Colombia can be considered as the rule rather than the exception since more than half the population can be defined as migratory.

More Latin American women migrate than men, and they generally head for metropolitan areas where work is available. Men, on the other hand, often move to distant settlements or to areas where there is seasonal agricultural work. Friends or relatives living in the cities help perpetuate the migratory flow, and once in the city, most migrants will tend to settle near them.

Three very important economic and social factors that have traditionally limited work opportunities in the rural sector determine rural-urban migration in Latin America: the structure of landholding, low agricultural productivity, and the rapid increase of population. Economic opportunities cannot keep pace with population growth. Furthermore, low productivity and the prevailing form of landholding -- concentration of property in a few hands -- seem to be related; productivity is lower on large estates than it is on small landholdings.

Workers are encouraged to migrate to cities by the better wages offered there. This is an important factor in making the decision to move, which is reached on the basis of the migrant's knowledge of the economic situation of the region he will move to.

Technological innovations that bring about an increase in worker productivity can stimulate migration by reducing work opportunities. However, several authors indicate that agricultural modernization can also produce the opposite effect by making formerly uncultivated lands productive, thereby providing new work opportunities. Ecological damage and soil erosion due to excessive land use can also cause the population to move. Another recent factor is class conflict: for example, in Colombia, the period of rural upheaval known as "the violence" that began in the 1950s sparked major migratory movements of the rural population to urban areas.

Initially it was thought that the migrants arrived directly from their place of origin to the city. It has been established, however, that this process is not so simple and occurs in stages, determined by the structure of the urban settlements in each country. Little is known, however, about the migrations from rural areas to small towns and intermediate cities since most studies have focussed on the large cities.

The study points out that scant research has been carried out on cyclical or seasonal migration, which is frequent in countries specializing in agricultural production for export. This type of migration is important in the Caribbean, Central America, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia and the sugar-growing areas of Argentina.

As to the effects of migration on the places of origin, no significant changes seem to occur in the labour market and wage levels of these areas. Migration can alter the age structure in the places of origin, however, as a result of the exodus of the youngest, most productive and most capable people. For the same reason, the natural growth rate of the population may decline.

Despite the dearth of studies and the use of indirect evidence on the effects of migration on the destination areas, it is clear that migrants do, in time, improve their economic situation and that the labour force in these areas grows as a result of the migration of young, productive people. A person with training will be able to use his ability and the untrained individual can acquire an education; migration will make social mobility easier and therefore contribute to the system's stability.

One major claim made about migration is that mainly illiterate peasants migrate to the city and crowd into slums, which become centers of social upheaval. However, no empirical evidence exists to link social and political instability to migration. Indeed, most migrants are better prepared for urban life than is generally thought, or they adapt very quickly to it; many, in fact, come from small or medium sized towns.

Although considerable knowledge has been acquired on population movements much remains to be studied, and there are important points on which future

research efforts would do well to concentrate. For instance, little information exists on the effects of migration on the receiving communities and on the communities of origin, and on the impact of government policies on migration. This phenomenon has frequently been studied in isolation and not as a variable in the development process.

Urban development in Latin America will continue to expand. The time has come, says the Migration Review Task Force, to carry out more studies on the impact of social and economic development policies that may lead to population redistribution patterns that will enhance overall development.

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